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Remarks Delivered by Gustav Henningburg
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at the Annual Conference of Coalition Directors
San Antonio, Texas
December 10, 1971

THE STATE OF OUR CITIES

America's cities have been characterized as "melting pots", a term which has conveyed welcome, compassion and the hope of a brighter future for immigrants from around the world. This concept has been a glowing symbol of hope and opportunity for the disadvantaged and the oppressed for a long time. Today, the invitation dramatized by the Statue of Liberty's words "bring us your poor; persists in the minds of America's romantics, but America's racists are in control. The components in the pot have not melted, but the heat is still on! The cities are more like seething cauldrons of despair, frustration, hostility, limited opportunities, and conflict between and among those very people who were encouraged to come seeking a better life. Our once-great centers of industry, commerce, education and culture have been permitted...and even assisted...by government inaction, racism and shortsightedness to become centers of conflict rather than of community.

City schools border on educational, fiscal and physical bankruptcy. Urban residents are being forced to pay exorbitant taxes for diminishing and increasingly inefficient municipal services. Unemployment rolls are escalating in tandem with rapidly increasing welfare costs. Urban renewal and highway construction have become sanctioned instruments of destruction and dislocation, making ghetto-gypsies of hundreds of thousands of inner-city residents, while producing a minimum of new housing which can be afforded by those same uprooted people.

Despite the growing need for more effective and compassionate law enforcement, tensions between policemen and ghetto residents continue to escalate at an alarming rate. Organized labor, once the champion of the underprivileged, appears to have become one of society's most conservative institutions. Liberal religious leaders have been brought to their knees, not in prayer but

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in submission to conservative congregants who are determined that the church will not champion the cause of the poor. This has happened while we were spending billions of dollars rebuilding the economic and social structures of Germany and Japan, while the social and physical fabric of our own cities has disintegrated. We are also determined to start a new social order on the moon. While our international and interplanetary society building has advanced we have aggressively destroyed a nation half-a-world away through the expensive, persistent and inhumane idiocy of South Vietnam.

Obviously our priorities as a people and as a nation are distorted and irrational. It is no longer possible, even for those of us who claim urban expertise, to determine where in the order of America's priorities the survival of the cities can be placed.

There are no national champions for the cause of the cities. The leadership of the President as an advocate for the urban poor is fleeting, inconsistent and often patently contrary. The Congress is no better, and state governments are controlled by suburban and rural interests.

We are staggering along in a leadership vacuum which has no parallel in the history of this country. Those of us who are concerned with the plight of the urban poor often feel very much alone, as human and financial resources continue to be diverted to greener pastures.

Out of these contradictory circumstances, some harsh realities have become clear about leadership. It is not possible in America for a Black or Chicano or Puerto Rican or Indian or any other citizen of color to provide the direction necessary to cause a reordering of our national goals. The leadership required for the reordering of America's priorities concerning race and poverty will have to be provided by white Americans.

Where then is that white leadership? If asked to identify America's white leadership at the city, state or federal level...or in the private sector...that is capable of and committed to this task, I suspect we would all be struck mute.

As members of a minority group, we're often challenged with the question "Where is your leader?" My answer is simple..."Where is yours?" America's white majority is not failing in its search for solutions to these problems because it can't find black leadership to follow! Can you imagine whites in the southwest organizing behind Cesar Chavez? Or white ethnics in the north-east rallying around ~~Manuel~~ ^{Don} ~~Benito~~ ^{Shampton}? The leadership crisis is white, not black or brown or red.

We need to immediately begin a critical public discussion around the ramifications of this white leadership vacuum in terms of the future of

citizens of poverty and color. Until white America fully understands its own dilemma and gets itself together, we will all be "dike-patching" and darting from one conflict to the next.

✓ And please make no mistake about it...there will be conflict! In the past five years, 24 million Black Americans, and millions of others with other hues of color, have experienced very profound changes in their image of themselves. The need to know fully who we are; and what we are; and how we fit into the system in which we live is compelling. If the responses to these demands for identity and equitable participation in the system don't come forth positively and without equivocation, the pressures to change the system will escalate.

But...just at the point in history when millions are demanding changes to better accommodate the rising aspirations of people of color, the mood of the majority seems to be to dig in and maintain the status quo. There are even many in the majority who are going even a step further...they are psychologically reaching back for what they perceive to be the "good old days"--those days when all one had to do was get into a covered wagon and head west, digging gold and breathing clean fresh air along the way. With hard work one could get rich and help build a nation. There were no ghettos or pollution, and no Blacks or Chicanos or Puerto Ricans running around screaming for their rights. The Indians protested, but this only added excitement since the cops(cavalry) always seemed to arrive just in time. Those were the "good old days". If you don't believe we're reaching back look at the clothes we wear today!

Ah...what romantics we are. We have seduced ourselves into believing that somehow we can daydream our way out of this. But it isn't going to work. When millions of people are positively changing their image of themselves, and are confronted by many more millions who are determined that the system will not respond to their demand for change, there will be conflict!

The question then, especially for those of us who run Urban Coalitions, is not whether there will be conflict, but when; and what impact can we have in influencing the form the conflict takes? We need to quickly develop a credibility within all of the potential conflicting elements in our communities, and become the instrument through which their aspirations can be achieved in accommodation and communication with others; keeping before all the need to start pulling our cities together again.

LOUT [Of course, I need not remind Coalition professionals of these conflicts, nor that they will escalate in direct proportion to our inability...or refusal...as a society to find solutions. We have all recognized that reality, but need more improved skills at managing race/poverty conflicts than we now have.

The concept of managing conflict is not new. When two lawyers go into court they are in conflict. Labor and management representatives advocate conflicting positions at contract negotiation time. Political candidates engage in open, public combat. But these conflicts have been acknowledged as inevitable, and even useful. We have institutionalized the process and made rules to manage these conflicts. But racism blinds us to the need for acknowledging and developing ways to resolve race/poverty conflicts. It seems that the single technique we have perfected through constant use is "call the cops."

May I also offer a word of caution about two solutions which are being promoted as answers to the problems of the center city. The first of these is the "new city" concept, offered as a possible answer to the critical shortage of housing for the poor. The idea warrants full study and experimentation, but if we follow the recent patterns of planning, building and occupying new housing, the people who move into the new enclaves will be the same people who forced the urban poor into the position of needing a new city. They will be built by racially restricted construction unions, at a price and in locations which will automatically exclude the poor. Unless agents of the nation's poor play an integral role in the decision making processes of new city development from start to finish, this unique and creative concept will fail.

My second word of caution concerns regional government. Urban Coalition directors must be advocates for the empowerment and protection of city residents first. There are certainly some services which can better be provided on a regional basis...mass transit, pollution control, water and many others. But regionalization also carries with it the potential for severely diminishing the political power of the city resident. Finding a solution to the problem of the efficient distribution of essential services on the one hand, and encouraging the growing political aspirations of city residents on the other, must become a matter of conscious concern on our part.

The third, and perhaps one of the most difficult tasks that we will have to address is the growing conflict between and among minority groups. All of us have been concerned for many years about the conflicts between white and black. We have acknowledged the existence of such tensions, and created institutions and processes to deal with them. But few organizations have begun to acknowledge the growing conflicts between and among minority groups. The Urban Coalition may well be the only instrument in many cities which has any capability to respond to this problem. We cannot evade the responsibility of trying to resolve such frictions, with a sensitivity for the self interest of each, within the context of survival of the total community.

The tasks today are considerably more difficult than they were when Urban Coalitions were created out of the bloodshed of 1967. This reality surfaces at a time when interest and participation by board members and contributors is beginning to wane. The problems of the cities are miracle-resistant, and those with shallow understanding and minimal commitment are falling away to crusades fraught with less frustration. With increasing frequency, well wishers caution that if we persist in identifying and tackling the real gut issues, raising money will be more difficult. That may well be so, but the moment we begin sorting out and confronting only those problems which are compatible and comfortable for our contributors, is the moment the Coalitions' integrity and credibility becomes suspect. Let us hope that the historians will not be able to write, some day hence, that the Urban Coalition movement, and its professionals and volunteers had guts and integrity in such short supply as to have given up the fight for our cities over the threat of tight money.

This is the first night of the rest of our lives, individually and organizationally. May we use this moment to recommit ourselves to the task we started four years ago, more determined than ever to improve the quality of life for all Americans who bear the dual liability of color and poverty.

Peace.

1/7/72